

Merging The U.S. Army And The U.S. Marine Corps Another Crazy Idea Or An Inevitable Fact?

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Merging the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps

Another crazy idea or an inevitable fact?

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INTRODUCTION

In many countries, the department of defense mandates the services to work more efficiently, resulting in pressure to reduce budgets. This mandate is driving services in many countries to work more jointly. In fact, several times in the past, suggestions have been made to merge the U.S. Marine Corps with the U.S. Army. In some countries, like the Netherlands, the subject is under investigation at this moment. However, in the corporate world such a merger would most likely be perceived as a hostile takeover by the smaller service. Indeed, corporate mergers provide some valuable lessons on the art of mergers and acquisitions, specifically that cultural compatibility is crucial.

BACKGROUND

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the perceived diminishing world threat, many countries cut their defense budgets and required the defense departments and their services to work more efficiently. In the United States, the Goldwater-Nichols Act¹ was a consequence of this call for efficiency.² Some

¹ The impact of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 on Civilian/ Military relations, Con McDonald, Strategy Research Project, Army War College, 5 April 2000, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania **and** The Goldwater-Nichols Act: An assessment of the Marine Corps' response, Major M.J. Popovich, USMC, Army Command and General Staff College, May 1998, Fort Leavenworth, Texas

² The debacle of the US forces in Iran and events in Beirut made it clear that the four armed services had to coordinate their efforts more efficient. One of the major recommendations of the Goldwater-Nichols Act was to install a Joint Chief of Staff with an "independent" chairman who would advise the Secretary of Defense and the President of the United States.

departments like pay and strategic transport were even combined and are now supporting the whole defense department instead of one service. However, policymakers still see a lot of duplication in the services, and joint operations may not be enough to still their hunger for more efficiency and, ultimately, for more savings. In fact, although merging services or parts thereof looks pretty good on paper, the rationale for separation of services may not withstand all its critics if viewed in the context of corporate experience.

CORPORATE MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS

In the business world, mergers occur for similar reasons, such as achieving economies of scale, gaining operating efficiencies, and improving one's relative "market position." However, corporate experience suggests that certain prerequisites have to be met for a merger or acquisition to be successful, starting with common values and a common culture.

The reality is that "corporate culture clashes have become the leading cause of merger failures, according to management specialists."³ For example, the merger between Time Warner and AOL cost the new company a lot of money and resulted in the loss of some top executives. After AOL bought Time Warner, they sold some of the Time-Warner magazine holdings because they felt

³Joann S. Lublin, and Bridget O'Brian, "Merged Firms Often Face Culture Clash, Business Offer Advice on Ways to Avoid Minefields." *Wall Street Journal*, (14 February 1997). A9A

magazines would become obsolete. Many Time Warner top executives left disgusted by the new company policy. It soon became evident that magazines and papers were not something of the old world and old Time Warner executives were lured back in an effort to undo some of the initial damage. Another merger, which proved to be a very costly enterprise, was the merger between Daimler Benz and Chrysler. This merger was expected to be more efficient and profitable for both companies, but the new company lost \$5.8 billion in the first year (2001), and Daimler-Chrysler had to make some severe cuts in an effort to become more cost effective. In both cases, key decisionmakers failed to communicate effectively and poor business decisions were made because both companies had different corporate cultures which inhibited constructive cooperation.

THE MILITARY MERGER!

According to Army Brigadier General Daniel Hahn, Chief of Staff V Corps, Operation Iraqi Freedom, there is "no dramatic difference" between the Army and the Marine Corps.⁴ Therefore, in his eyes there is no apparent obstacle to merge the Army and the Marine Corps. In fact, many believe such a merger would be mutually beneficial. For example, the Marine Corps is relatively small and not capable of conducting self-sustaining operations

⁴James Kitfield, "An Agile, Just-In-Time Force." *National Journal*, (22 March 2003). vol. 35, Iss 12, p.892

for more than 60 days.⁵ The Army is capable of "long-term sustainment and support of forces in theater."⁶ The Marines would profit from this great resource of logistics, fire support, and transport capabilities. Similarly, the Army would profit from the additional infantry, well trained in combined arms and from the capability to shape the battle space with Marine air.

Moreover, both services could achieve synergy in terms of providing the U.S. a formidable amphibious forced entry capability.⁷ According to David Szelowski the Navy - Marine Corps team lacks the assets to implement classic amphibious doctrine independently. Therefore, a merger between the Army and the Marine Corps would provide the Marines with enough capabilities (fire support and additional over-the-horizon transport⁸) to conduct forcible entry. Ultimately, the Army would profit by gaining a force that could be readily deployed around the world.

In addition, other amphibious synergies can be achieved. Though the Marine Corps has the primary responsibility for expeditionary amphibious operations, joint doctrine clearly states that the Army has a role in operations originating from

⁵ Department of the Navy. MCDP 1-0, Marine Corps Operations. (Washington, D.C.: 2001).

⁶ James Kitfield, "An Agile, Just-In-Time Force." *National Journal*, (22 March 2003). vol. 35, Iss 12, p.892

⁷ The Marine Corps and the Army, in fact are conducting separate studies (Concepts & Programs 2003) on this issue. However a joint effort certainly would seem more appropriate.

⁸ The Army CH-47 and MH-60 helicopters are equipped for in-flight refueling. The Marines only have the CH-53 Super Stallion. Also, the Marine Corps artillery rocket/ missile system is under development, but will not be operational until fiscal year 2008. The Army has combat-proved tactical missile systems and multiple rocket launchers. The Marine Corps has some running projects but they are still not fully operational (Osprey and EFV).

the sea.⁹ Besides, the U.S. Army appears to have more ships than the U.S. Navy and a wide range of different kinds of landing craft. In contrast, the Navy has insufficient amphibious ships to support the whole Marine Corps during an amphibious operation. As a consequence, a merger would provide the Marines with additional landing craft from the Army. This would make a more rapid build-up of combat power ashore possible, thus improving the chances of success in an early stage in amphibious operations. The Army would also profit by obtaining secured beaches and ports for Army follow-on forces who could provide sustainment.

CORPORATE CULTURES

While the merger of the Army and the Marine Corps looks good on paper, major cultural differences could undermine the merger. In their book *"Managing Organizational Change,"* Connor, Lake, and Stackman describe the corporate culture as "the set of values, guiding beliefs, understandings, and ways of thinking that is shared by members of an organization and is taught to new members as correct." Corporate culture is described using four elements ranging from the most basic and most visible indicators to the core assumptions shared by the members of the organization. Accordingly, a comparison of the Marine Corps and the Army

⁹ Department of Defense. *Joint Publication 3-02, Joint Publication for Amphibious Operations*, (October 1992).

culture reveals some serious differences and impediments for merging:

1. **Indicators.** The observable behaviors and visible artifacts.

- a. Stories. Marine Corps stories revolve around the battles in which the Corps has fought, such as Iwo Jima, Chosin Reservoir, and the Gulf War. In contrast, the Army war stories focus on separate units. All Marines are called "Devil Dogs," while stories are related about Army units with names such as Screaming Eagles and All American"
- b. Language. Even their basic language differs. For example, because of their naval character, Marines "close the hatch" instead of the door and floors are referred to as "decks," even when they are not on a ship. In contrast, Army soldiers use more common lay terms such as "doors" and "floors."
- c. Symbols. The Marines have their well known eagle, globe, and anchor plus the Iwo Jima memorial. By comparison, the Army maintains famous unit symbols, like the eagle for the Screaming Eagles (101st Division). Furthermore, the Army uniform is decorated with patches which show specialty, unit, and courses taken in contrast to the Marines who can

only wear their wings and bubble (pilots, divers, and paratroopers).

2. Norms of behavior. The norms that guide the members in the organization in the execution of their job and in their social interaction.

- a. Execution norms I. Both the Marines and the Army infantry units put their mission accomplishment before their troop welfare. However, to accomplish their mission, Marines are taught to improvise, adapt, and overcome, while the Army has a tendency to rely heavily on duty experts. Certain Army prerequisites have to be met before a mission can be accomplished successfully.
- b. Execution norms II. Furthermore, each Marine is first a Marine rifleman and then a specialist. This is in stark contrast to the Army, where a soldier identifies himself first with his specialty and his job.
- c. Social norms I. An important yearly recurring social event for the Marine Corps is their birthday ball. This traditional event is celebrated the world over by all Marines. While some Army units have a similar event, nothing exists on the scale of the Marine Corps Birthday Ball.

d. Social norms II. Marines are made in boot camp after a long and tough training period. This is where they first learn to take care of each other, something which stays with most of them throughout the rest of their lives. It is in boot camp that the Marine Corps ethos is planted and nurtured. In contrast, the Army gives its recruits just a basic initial training in soldiering. After this basic training, the soldier specializes before becoming an asset to his unit, where his or her work ethos is further developed.

3. **Basic Values.** The underlying values below the surface make the organizations the kinds of cultures they are.

a. The Marine Corps places more responsibility on its junior NCOs than the Army does. Conversely, the Army is sometimes reluctant to give responsibility to its NCOs.

b. Moreover, Marines are known as risk takers compared to the more cautious Army. The Army trains extensively and the specialists try to prepare for all possible events. On the other hand, the Marine is expected just "to make it happen."

c. In addition, the Marine Corps describes itself as a flexible, expeditionary force in readiness, well-

trained in combined arms, and naval in character. Inherent to operating expeditionary, the organization has to be flexible and Marines must be able to do everything until a foothold for the follow on forces (Army) is secured. Hence, the Marine Corps can be described as a Corps of generalists, while the Army can be described as a force of specialists.

4. **Fundamental assumptions.** These assumptions tend to be immune from confrontation or debate, and thus, possibly, change. They are perceptions that reflect how the members of an organization perceive, think, and feel about things. For Marines, this is illustrated by the words: "Once a Marine always a Marine." These words indicate that the Corps is a lifetime commitment and a way of living for most, if not all Marines. Retired Marines still have a strong bond with the Corps and are often asked by the Marine Corps to contribute their knowledge to the young Marines. Conversely, the Army's former slogan "Be all you can be" is probably how most soldiers still view their Army careers—as individuals. It is a job, and you get out of it as much as you can; when you retire, it is over and forgotten.

(CORPORATE) IMPLICATIONS

Though there are similarities, it is quite obvious that there are major cultural differences between the Army and the Marine Corps. Just as in the corporate world, the search for more efficiency within the U.S. Armed Forces will not be resolved quickly or successfully until the cultural differences are resolved.¹⁰

These differences, and the fact that people usually resist change, will make a merger between the Army and the Marine Corps very difficult. Most Marines will probably not see the need to merge and or will not accept a possible merger. The merger might be perceived as a threat to their security (the working environment in which they feel secure) or as a loss of power, since an Army general would probably command the newly formed force. (The U.S. Army is the larger organization.)

If a merger between the Army and the Marine Corps is pursued without a clear strategy to unite these disparate cultures, the resulting organization will run the risk of serious failure. In the military, in contrast to the corporate world where a company would lose money, failure could result in the loss of lives. Similarly, in the corporate world other motivators and options exist: Money can make a difference, and people can be more easily convinced to look for a new employer if they don not like the

¹⁰ Joann S. Lublin, and Bridget O'Brian, "Merged Firms Often Face Culture Clash, Business Offer Advice on Ways to Avoid Minefields." *Wall Street Journal*, (14 February 1997). A9A

newly formed organization. This is not the case in the military. A unified vision for integrating U.S. forces on the battlefield and overcoming cultural differences is crucial.¹¹ In the meantime, an "independent" Marines Corps should be fostered because they have unique capabilities, including organizational flexibility.

CONCLUSION

The differences in organizational cultures between the Marine Corps and the Army could very well be the showstopper for a merger. Marines are used to work in austere environments under harsh conditions and with relatively little resources. Marines are an asset and should not be wasted to achieve paper economies of scale.

¹¹ Bradley Graham, "Study Panel Outlines A Streamlined Military." *The Washington Post*, (15 May 1995). A.23

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